



BUILD A BETTER WEBSITE

You don't need to be an expert in web design to make your online presence classy and user-friendly – and you don't need much cash either, as Tom Gorham explains

Web sites have changed over the past few years. Once you could cobble together a few pages of HTML and consider yourself a cutting-edge web designer. Now big budget websites such as the BBC and Amazon, where content changes by the minute, are the benchmark of how dynamic sites can be. Can your humble site keep up, and can you do it without taking a course in website development or hiring an expensive designer?

Luckily, it is possible to make your site look a million dollars even on the tightest budget. Over the next few pages, we'll show you how to upgrade your site to make it smarter and more interactive without breaking the bank.

GETTING YOUR OWN DOMAIN

If you host your site on the web space that came as part of a dial-up or broadband package, you'll know its main drawbacks. For a start, your web address screams 'Amateur!' You can instantly add a more professional look to your site by giving it its own domain name, and this costs less than you might think.

First, check that the name of your choice is available. Use a domain registrar such as www.ukreg.com. Many obvious names are taken, so you may need to be flexible. A .co.uk domain name is registered for a fixed two-year term and can be picked up for around £3 a year,

while more expensive .com sites can usually be bought annually for around £10.

You don't need to buy more web space and can continue to use your existing web space if your domain name supplier supports web forwarding. This technique forwards visitors who type your domain name into their web browser to your original web space. However, if you want more flexibility, it makes sense to pay a single company to look after the domain name and site. Aside from generally faster server speeds, dedicated web space also provides more disk space as well as additional services such as database access and scripting services. These services let you create a more dynamic site.

The question is, how do you choose from the wide range of hosting options available? Commonly, you're offered a choice between Linux and Windows-based servers. Your decision here will probably be influenced by your choice of web design application or programming language. Adobe's Dreamweaver integrates happily with databases that run on Linux machines, as does PHP. However, if you are using Microsoft Expression Web you won't get very far unless you use a .NET-compatible Windows host.

Packages offer a set amount of storage and a bandwidth limit for a monthly fee. SupaNames (www.supanames.co.uk) offers a Linux-based

server with 150MB of space and a database for around £15 a year, rising to £90 a year for 3.5GB space, 5,000 mailboxes, 10 databases and FrontPage extensions. We tested 15 web-hosting packages in *Labs*, *Shopper* 242. The Best Buy award-winner was eUKhost's Gold package, which offers 5GB of storage, 50GB per month bandwidth allowance and unlimited email accounts for £4.60 per month.

Service reliability is critical. Professional sites cannot disappear for days on end. Before choosing a host you should ask if it has a guaranteed uptime, which is measured as the percentage of time that the server remains accessible online. Even 99.9 per cent uptime means that you could potentially suffer over 40 minutes every month when nobody can access your site. However, 99.99 per cent uptime reduces your site's non-availability to an average of 52 minutes a year. That could be worth paying more for if your site makes money.

FIGURING OUT THE DESIGN

At the same time as establishing your website's domain, you need to think about its structure and appearance. Sketch your site's layout to establish the number of pages you need and their hierarchy – in other words, which pages will go at the top level of your menus and which will be subpages. Steal a trick from web design

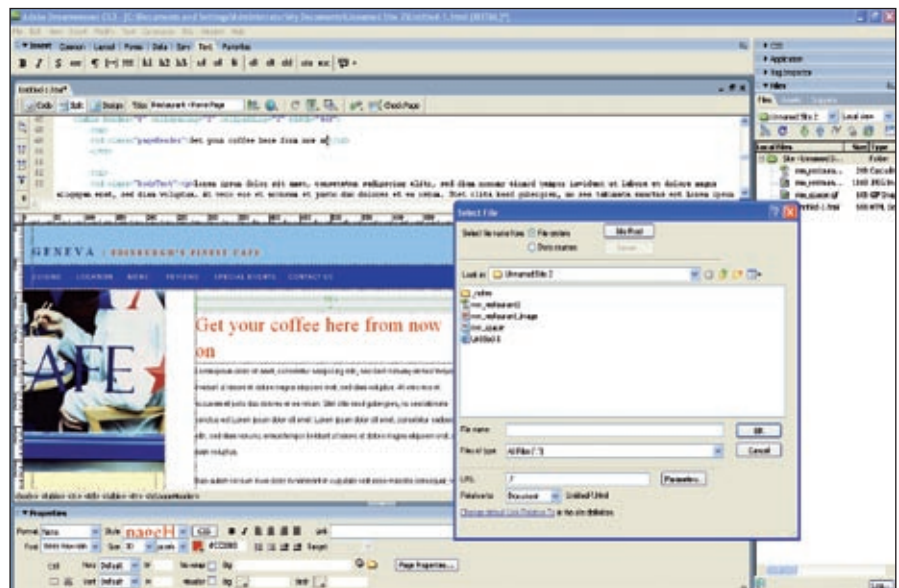


companies, who often use a 'card sort' where each card has the name of one of your site's pages on it, and you arrange and rearrange them on a table to work out the best way to organise content and navigation.

The best approach is to visit sites you admire and work out what you like about them. One common theme in professional-looking sites is consistency. This is not difficult to handle, even on the smallest budget. If you are using a graphical HTML editor such as Microsoft's Expression Web (www.microsoft.com/expression/), Adobe Dreamweaver (www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver/) or the free KompoZer (www.kompozer.net/), you can create templates or master pages. These make it easy for page elements such as the main header graphic (a logo, for example) or navigation menu to repeat on each of your site's pages. In the template, your site's name and logo should be clearly visible. The navigation menu, which provides quick links to other parts of the site, should be positioned where people will expect it, either horizontally underneath the logo or vertically to the left of the page. See page 158 for more on templates, and page 145 for our Labs test of web design software.

A more complicated but effective technique is available if your domain host allows Server Side Includes (SSI). SSI lets you insert pieces of HTML code inside a page. In practice, this means you can upload a header or footer file to your server and have it appear identically on all pages by using a couple of lines of code on each page. Any changes to the header or footer file will appear instantly on all the pages, which makes redesigning a site far easier than editing each page manually. Using SSI in Dreamweaver is simple. Choose Server Side Includes from the Insert menu, point it to the file you wish to include, and you're done.

The best way to ensure visual consistency is to use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), which contain text-based instructions that describe the appearance of different page elements. An element could be a heading, some basic text or an image. A combination of CSS commands can create an entire layout, with columns and rows of content. CSS keeps the presentation of your page separate from its content, thereby making it easier to update. Although CSS rules can be included inside every HTML page on your site,



▲ Dreamweaver is the most powerful WYSIWYG HTML editor on the market. It works well with lots of other design tools and provides features for both graphic designers and programmers

it's better to have a single CSS page to which all pages in a site refer. This ensures consistency and makes updating easier.

You don't need to code CSS manually, although you can. Modern web-authoring applications have built-in CSS editors and use CSS-based templates and themes. When you apply custom styles to a text object in Dreamweaver, they are created as CSS styles.

BUILDING A DYNAMIC SITE

An important step in making your website look professional is to turn it into a dynamic website, where pages are created on the fly, usually using a combination of a scripting language and a database. The most popular choices include MySQL for the database, which holds the content, with the PHP scripting language extracting the page content from the database. The database can be used to power all manner of functions, such as an online shopping system, a chat forum or a content management system. Each function usually needs its own database, so you should plan your needs from the outset and buy a hosting deal with sufficient databases.

PHP code can be inserted directly into a webpage's HTML code, and is interpreted on the



▲ Forums are a great way to build a community. Keep your forum's appearance in line with the rest of your site by adjusting the CSS behind it

server. This means that it is invisible to the user, so there are no special browser requirements to run it. As a result, your visitors can use any choice of web browser, including those installed on mobile phones and games consoles.

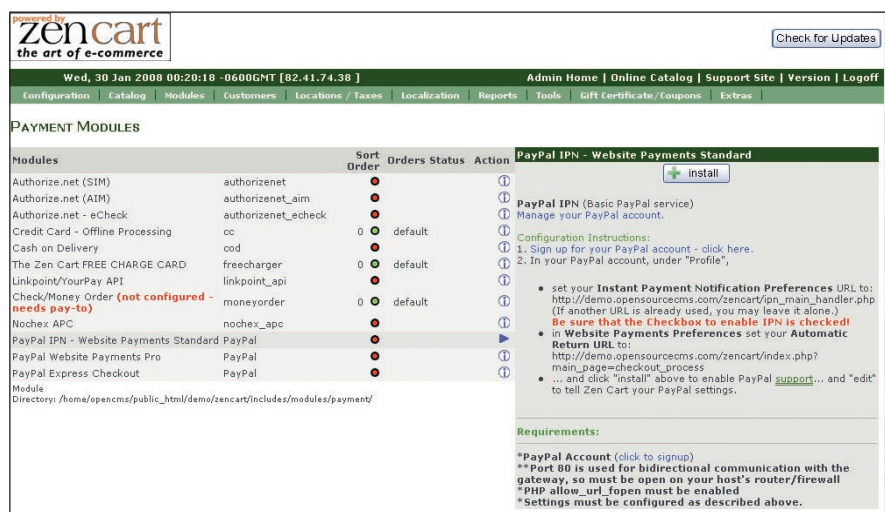
It is a popular idea to use PHP and MySQL to power online forums and e-commerce applications. Forums are a great way to draw users to your site and build a community. You can benefit from the popularity of running a forum without having to learn how to program PHP, though. There is some excellent free forum software around, the best being phpBB (www.phpbb.com/). To install it, just upload the phpBB folder to your server's web space and follow the instructions.

There are several ways to make money out of your site, from displaying affiliate links to advertising banners, but if your existing website is your business's shop window you'll want to be able to sell direct to the public. This is not as complicated as it sounds. Free software such as osCommerce (www.oscommerce.com/) and Zen Cart (www.zen-cart.com/) can be uploaded to your site, although you'll need a merchant bank account to take credit or debit card payments. Both let you take payments through the PayPal money transfer service (www.paypal.co.uk/), too.

To ensure that forums and e-commerce tools fit in with the rest of your site, you will need to configure their CSS entries to match your main design.

MANAGING YOUR CONTENT

Most professional websites are based on a content management system (CMS). A CMS



▲ Selling directly over the web isn't the huge hurdle it was a decade ago. Armed with a copy of Zen Cart, you can even take payments if you install the program's PayPal module

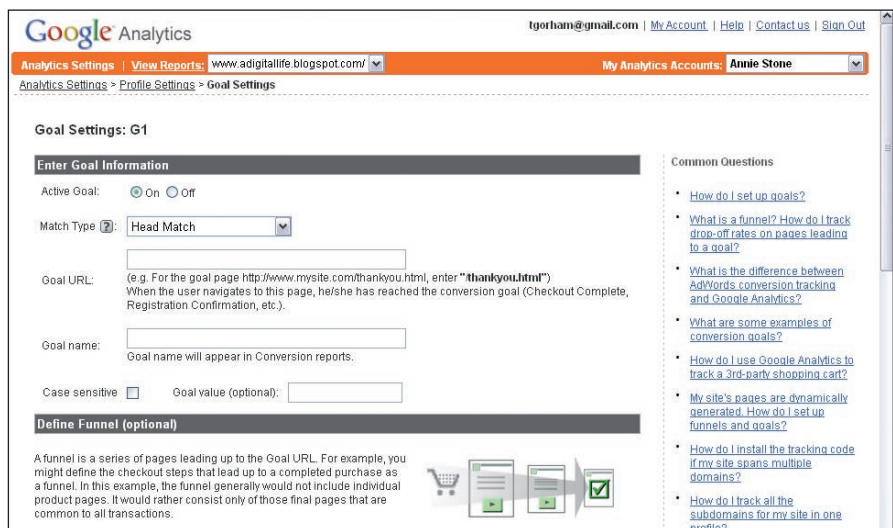


separates the content of a website (its text and images) from its appearance. This makes it easy for more than one person to edit content without their mistakes affecting the appearance of the site. A CMS sits on a web server rather than a desktop PC, so you can update its content wherever you are.

CMS software comes in many guises. One popular option is WordPress (<http://wordpress.org>). Although it has a reputation as a blogging tool, its developer community has built powerful plug-ins, including an e-commerce module (www.instinct.co.nz/e-commerce). Other CMS options include the free ExpressionEngine Core (<http://expressionengine.com>) and Joomla! (www.joomla.org), both of which use template systems to control the appearance of the site. Like WordPress, Joomla!'s modular design means that common functions are easy to add. An integrated and sophisticated forum called Fireboard can be installed in a few clicks.

The system requirements of such CMS programs are broadly similar and require a combination of a SQL-compatible database and PHP. If you haven't got a spare database, all is not lost. For example, neither Quick.Cms (<http://opensolution.org>) nor CMSimple (www.cmsimple.dk) requires a database, and both can run on any host that supports PHP.

You don't need to be a programming expert to use a CMS to build a new site. You don't even need to be a graphic designer, as most CMS programs come with pre-built themes. In many



▲ Google's Analytics package gives details such as the screen resolution used by visitors to your site, which can help determine your site's future design

cases, changing the site's appearance can be a matter of selecting a different theme from the CMS's control panel.

Installation is usually simple. Normally, you upload the CMS program folder to your web space, enter the database details supplied by your ISP into a configuration file, and step through the browser-based setup script. Your site should be up and running in minutes. Some domain providers, such as 34SP ([\[wordpresshosting.34sp.com\]\(http://wordpresshosting.34sp.com\)\), even offer a pre-built WordPress installation for you.](http://</p>
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VALIDATING YOUR PAGES

As your website begins to look more professional, it will attract a bigger audience. That means a wider variety of visitors using different web browsers. One of a web designer's main goals is to create a site that works well regardless of which web browser is used by visitors. An important step in achieving this is to ensure that the HTML used to create the pages is correct. Checking this is called validation, and it can be accomplished in a number of ways.

Dreamweaver, Expression Web and KompoZer have their own built-in validation tools, but if you're working on an editor that lacks a similar function you can upload a single page or an entire site to the online W3C Markup Validation Service (<http://validator.w3.org>). This site runs through your HTML and CSS code, checking its syntax. If you want to see how your pages will look on different browsers then enter your site's URL in the Browsershots (<http://browsershots.org>) comparison site. This will display your pages as they appear, rendered in a range of esoteric browsers at different screen sizes.

TRACKING YOUR USERS

Statistics have come a long way since page counters were *de rigueur*. Now they are a vital professional tool to show how people get to your site, and how they use it. When it comes to analysis software, Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics) is perfect, as it is both free and packed with very detailed analysis information. Furthermore, it does not impose an overhead on your website. Once you have registered with Analytics, copy a small piece of code into every page on your site that you want to track. A quick, simple way to do this would be to add the code to a header or footer that is already being inserted on to each page using SSL.

An alternative is Mint (www.haveamint.com), which costs \$30 (around £15). Install it on your web server to get instant feedback on visitors. This gives it the edge over Analytics, which makes you wait several hours for the statistics to update. However, Mint requires its own MySQL database. **CS**

Frame academy Working with templates

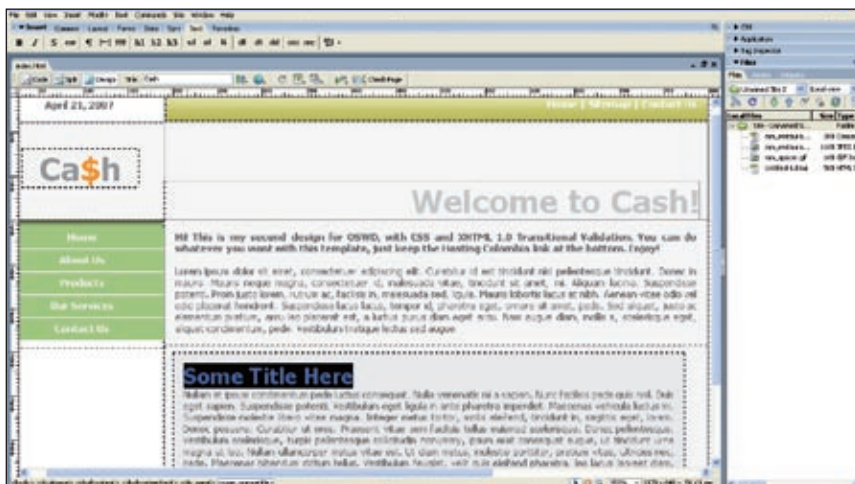
You don't have to be a design expert to produce a professional-looking website. An easier alternative to learning how to master CSS is to base your site on a template produced by other designers.

Templates are frequently offered by web-hosting companies as part of their service, or as a low-cost extra. Compila (www.compila.com) provides more than 300 downloadable templates with its packages. Other hosts offer a complete template-based, website-building service. Easily's £30 Website Creator Starter package (<http://easily.co.uk>) builds a site with Flash intros and feedback forms, while 1&1 (www.1and1.co.uk) offers a free WebsiteBuilder service – an online website

creation application that can create a website from a basic, configurable template.

The drawback with such templates is that it's difficult to customise them beyond their different colour schemes and graphics. Tying an entire site's design to a particular web host could prove complicated if you move hosts, too.

If your provider doesn't offer templates, there are plenty of third-party sites that do, such as www.steves-templates.com or the Open Source Web Design site (www.oswd.org). These are refreshingly flexible, and you can import them into your web design application easily and then edit them to your heart's content.



▲ Cash is an HTML template from the Open Source Web Design site, which has more than 2,000 free templates. These sets of HTML files are supported by CSS files, which govern their appearance